

# CHAPTER 4

## EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

### INTRODUCTION

The success of your business depends in large part on the men and women who work for you. Protecting their safety and health on the job makes good business sense. It also is the right thing to do. You need not face this considerable task alone. In this chapter we will show how employee involvement can strengthen your safety and health program.

OSHA's Safety and Health Program Management Guidelines recommend that all employers "provide and encourage employee involvement in the structure and operation of their [safety and health] program and in decisions that effect their safety and health." This chapter looks at some of the reasons behind this recommendation and some of the ways you can implement it. Different approaches are appropriate for union and non-union worksites; we will look at both. This chapter's appendices offer some concrete examples and suggestions that can help you get started.

### WHY SHOULD EMPLOYEES BE INVOLVED?

Involving your employees in a program that directly affects their safety and health will enhance the effectiveness or success of the program. It is also the smart thing to do. Here is why:

- Rank and file workers are the persons most in contact with potential safety and health hazards. They have a vested interest in effective programs.
- Recent experience has shown that line workers and other rank and file employees make highly valuable problem solvers.
- Group decisions have the advantage of the group's wider field of experience. Research shows that employees are more likely to support and use programs in which they have had input.
- Employees who are encouraged to offer their ideas and whose contributions are taken seriously are more satisfied and productive on the job.

Close Contact With Hazards. The owner/manager, has a solid grasp of the company's overall operations. Line workers, on the other hand, probably have a more detailed knowledge of each operation at your worksite. Employees have an understanding of workplace hazards and realize that they have the most to gain from preventing or controlling exposure to those hazards. Knowledgeable and aware employees tend to be safe workers and also good sources of ideas for better hazard prevention and production or quality enhancement ideas. They do the tasks that may expose them to potential hazards.

Value as Problem Solvers. For many years Japanese companies have used their workers to help solve various kinds of workplace problems. American companies are now utilizing more employee involvement. Worker participation in the United States is most common in the area of quality control. Safety and health issues are even better suited to worker involvement for the reasons already explained.

Improved Support. Managers often complain that they cannot get workers to comply fully with required safety measures, whether that means wearing appropriate personal protective equipment or following safe work procedures. How do you change that?

Most of us do not like to have ideas forced upon us. We are more apt to support ideas we help develop and implement. Line workers allowed to participate in the rule making process have a personal stake in ensuring that the rules are followed.

Try involving employees in establishing rules and procedures. If enforcement remains a problem, you still have the option of taking disciplinary action.

Value of Group Decisions. Decision making by committee frequently gets a bad rap. More often than not complaints center on the slowness of the process rather than on the quality of the product. Using committees may not be the fastest way to reach a decision, but group decisions are often more accepted throughout the organization. These decisions benefit from the many points of view and varied experiences of the group's members.

## MORE INVOLVEMENT MEANS BETTER WORK

Employees involved in helping their bosses uncover and solve workplace problems tend to enjoy their work more than those who simply do what they are told. When workers enjoy work, they take a greater interest in their job tasks and are likely to produce a better quality product. They also are less likely to look elsewhere for jobs. Thus, reduced turnover often is a benefit of increased employee involvement.

## WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO TO HELP?

Employees can participate usefully in just about any activity related to safety and health. The choices are yours. Examples of employee participation include, but are not limited to:

- Participating on joint labor-management committees and other advisory or specific purpose committees;
- Conducting site inspections;
- Analyzing routine hazards in each step of a job or process and preparing safe work practices or controls to eliminate or reduce exposure;
- Developing and revising the site safety and health rules;
- Training both current and newly hired employees;
- Providing programs and presentation at safety and health meetings;
- Conducting accident/incident investigations;
- Participating in decision making throughout the company's operations.

Some of these activities require training if employees are to act proficiently. The training need not be elaborate and can be given at your work

## COMMITTEE PARTICIPATION

Joint labor-management committees are the classic method of employee participation. At many unionized worksites employee safety committees -- with members selected by the union or elected by employees -- work alone, without management, on various tasks. At some worksites hourly workers participate on a central safety committee. In addition, some worksites use employee or joint committees for specific purposes, such as inspecting the site for hazards, investigating accidents and incidents, and training new employees.

Classic Joint Labor-Management Committees. These committees usually have equal representation of labor and management. The chair may alternate between an employee representative and a management representative. The number of committee members should be large enough to represent all relevant areas and shifts of a worksite. Where there is more than one bargaining unit, it may be appropriate to include representatives from each on the committee. The powers of the committees are worked out through negotiation.

Ideally, the members chosen should have the broadest contact with areas and operations of known high risk and/or with large numbers of workers. It is recommended that all areas of the workplace be represented on the committee. Since there is a limit to the number of people who

can be appointed to the committee, it is important that they be chosen carefully. When determining the management members who shall serve on the committee, it is important to include someone with budgetary authority. It may be useful to include the safety officer, engineering or facility manager(s), and manager(s) responsible for employee education and training. Committee members should periodically rotate, allowing more employees to serve on the committee. Rotating members exposes more employees to health and safety issues and can also provide as a great training tool. Successful rotation of members could be accomplished by staggering starting and ending dates of service on the committee. Although tasks depend upon the outcome of these negotiations, the committees typically conduct:

- Site inspections with oversight of hazard corrections,
- Investigations of employee reports of hazards,
- Accident investigations, and
- Safety and health awareness program development.

Be sure to communicate the role of the safety committee in your organization. Let individuals in the company know the role of the committee and who they are. Be sure to inform employees throughout the company if issues discussed or action which has resulted from committee meetings. This can be done by distributing or posting minutes.

Other Joint Committees. In other joint committees there may be either more employee participants (for example, at a construction site where several different trade unions represent workers) or more management participants (especially where medical, safety and industrial hygiene personnel are counted as management). These committees frequently are chaired by the highest ranking safety “specialist” at the site, but sometimes they are chaired by an hourly employee who is elected by the committee itself. They work by consensus and do not take formal votes. Their usual functions are similar to the classic joint committees.

Employee Safety Committees. These usually are union safety committees with membership determined by the union. Some worksites with more than one union will have more than one union safety committee. The committee operates without direct management involvement, but it meets regularly with management and management staff. At these meetings the committee raises concerns and management provides responses. The committee may conduct inspections and investigate employee reports of hazards, but it usually will carry findings to management for action. The committee also may design and present employee awareness programs.

Central Safety Committee. At non-union sites, particularly in the chemical industry, the central safety committee consists of the site manager and the executive staff. In recent years, some companies have discovered that it is helpful to have hourly worker representation on this committee. Some sites rotate employee participation on the committee so that all workers take part. At other sites management selects the hourly workers for their experience and achievements in other safety and health employee participation systems.

The central safety committee is an oversight committee with an interest in every part of the safety and health program. It sometimes serves as the hazard correction tracking system. As such, the committee receives reports of all inspections, accident/incident investigations, employee reports of hazards, and ensures that all reported hazards are tracked until resolved.

Specific Function Committees. Some companies use single-function standing committees very effectively. Employees are given the opportunity to volunteer for membership. These committees may consist of only employees with management liaison; or there may be joint membership with some management and/or safety and health staff (including plant nurse/doctor). Each committee has a single responsibility, such as accident/incident investigation, site inspections, site safety and health rules, safety and health training, or safety and health awareness programs. The company provides committee members with needed

training and resources. Such resources might include assistance from site safety and health experts, reference materials, films and videos, or equipment (such as cameras) for accident and incident investigations or inspections.

Quality Circles. Quality circles are work groups usually formed to address quality problems. They spend some of their time brainstorming problems and solutions and frequently address problems that involve safety and health protection. The circles can address all aspects of a problem, not just quality or safety and health. For example, they also can look at productivity implications. Just make sure that part of their focus is to help you find and resolve safety and health problems.

## CONDUCTING SITE INSPECTIONS

Employee involvement is common in site inspections. Inspections can be conducted by a joint committee, an employee committee that performs several functions, a single-function inspection committee, or an individual employee acting as safety observer.

Whatever method you choose, you must train these employees to recognize hazards. They also should have access to your safety and health “experts” and to written references. For meaningful participation, the committee or safety observer should be able to suggest methods of correcting hazards and to track corrections to completion. For more information on making site inspections, see Chapter 9.

Committee Inspections. The group making the inspection probably should not exceed four people in a given area. At sites where larger committees perform several functions, inspections can be done by a subcommittee. Where inspections are the only function of a large committee, inspection duties can be rotated or small groups can be assigned to different parts of the worksite.

Safety Observers. Some workplaces have safety observers who periodically check their areas for hazards. Some check every day for the first few minutes of the shift. Others do more thorough weekly or monthly inspections. The frequency should depend on the nature of the hazards and the size of the worksite.

Safety observers usually work with the area supervisor to get hazards corrected. Normally, they do their checking alone. Some companies periodically bring together their safety observers to brainstorm problems or ideas that extend beyond the individual work areas. For your safety observers’ involvement to be fully effective, they should also be involved in correcting the hazards that they spot.

## ROUTINE HAZARD ANALYSIS

Employees can be very helpful in analyzing jobs, processes or activities for hidden hazards and in designing improved hazard controls. Employees and supervisors frequently are teamed up to accomplish these activities. For complicated processes, the team probably will be led by an engineer. Many companies find that workers who are involved with the procedures or processes on a daily basis make excellent analysts.

Workers are more likely to accept the changes that result from these analyses if they are involved in the decisions that affect practices and processes. For more information on routine hazard analysis and job hazard analysis in particular, see Chapter 7.

## DEVELOPING OR REVISING SITE SAFETY AND HEALTH RULES.

Giving employees responsibility for developing or updating your site's safety and health rules can be very beneficial. Employees who help make the rules are more likely to obey them and to remind others to obey them. Your employees, who possess an in-depth knowledge of their work and their co-workers, can contribute significantly to improving and strengthening the rules.

## TRAINING OTHER EMPLOYEES

Use your best qualified employees to teach safety and health rules and procedures and other topics to newly arrived workers. This technique can be very effective; it can even improve your ongoing training efforts. Many companies have seen excellent results from delegating responsibility for training of employees. For more information on safety and health training, see Chapter 11.

New Employee Orientation. Your hourly employees can make excellent instructors for new employees. You will want someone in management to present the personnel/employee relations portions of the orientation. Any other topics can be handled by appropriately trained rank and file workers. The trainer who provides this introduction to the job can follow up by acting as "mentor" and watch over the new employee, giving advice, and answering those questions that a newcomer might be afraid to ask a supervisor.

Ongoing Periodic Training. Many companies have found that making employees responsible for regular safety and health training sessions has two added benefits: it keeps interest in the sessions high, and it improves general safety and health awareness. Your employees will need some help from management to get started. They also will need management to provide ongoing assistance with new training ideas, materials, references, and other resources. You can involve employees in providing training by setting up a special committee, using a multifunction employee or joint committee, or simply rotating your workers through the training activity.

## PROGRAM PRESENTATION

We already have discussed using employees to present safety programs and other training activities. You also can involve employees in planning and presenting awareness programs such as safety and health newsletters, award programs, and poster or slogan contests. Remember, if you decide to establish an award or reward program, never encourage the under reporting of injuries or illness by rewarding employee for "hours worked without injury" or similar ideas. For further information see the discussion of reward programs in Chapter 8.

## ACCIDENT/INCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS

Employees frequently participate in accident/incident investigations. This can be accomplished by involving a single-function sub-committee. Employees doing investigations need appropriate training and equipment to perform successfully. For more information on accident/incident investigation, see Chapter 9.

## PERVASIVE PARTICIPATION

Although they are a small fraction of American workplaces, the number of facilities where employees are involved in all aspects of decision making is growing rapidly. Only a few years ago this type of participation was limited mainly to sites with highly trained and specialized employees. Now, workers whose skills have been developed primarily on the job can be found performing complex and sophisticated tasks such as computer analyses of product quality,

production efficiency and safety questions. Operator groups work closely with engineers to solve workplace problems and design improvements.

Where a system of participation by all employees exists, no special program is needed to involve employees; participation already is built into all operations. For companies that have not yet tried employee participation this method probably is not the best way to get started. As a long-term goal it may be desirable for any type of industry or workplace.

### **DIFFERENT APPROACHES: UNION VERSUS NON-UNION SITES**

Employee involvement at unionized worksites is achieved differently from that at non-union worksites. Neither type of workplace is necessarily more conducive than the other to successful employee participation in safety and health programs.

If you are accustomed to union workplaces, you may believe that genuine employee involvement is impossible with a union. If you have always worked in non-union workplaces, you may think that a program of employee involvement inevitably will lead to unionization. Neither view is necessarily correct.

If you plan to establish a system of employee involvement at a non-union site, you may have to overcome considerable worker hesitation. Employees may need to be convinced that their participation is wanted and will be taken seriously. That includes protecting them from harassment when they get involved in safety and health activities. You face the task of starting to build a whole company or worksite "family culture." Since you do not want your employees to think of management as "them", everyone should be encouraged to begin thinking in terms of "we" and "us".

At both union and non-union worksites, employee involvement relies on respect. At union sites it is respect between representatives of organizations; at non-union sites it is respect among individuals.

### **UNIONIZED SITES**

Since a reduction in occupational illnesses and injuries is clearly beneficial to both workers and management, this goal lends itself to joint union-management efforts. The union will need to be involved in such a project from the very beginning. This particular goal of improved safety and health usually is easier to reach if removed from the normal collective bargaining channels. For example, some worksites have a clause in the collective bargaining agreement saying that safety and health are not subject to negotiation. Others require that personnel involved in the safety and health cooperative effort not be involved in contract negotiations or grievance resolution.

Usual Forms of Employee Involvement. The most common form of cooperative, participatory effort is the joint labor-management safety committee. Sometimes, however, an all-employee safety committee will be used.

The duties of the committees can range from reviewing hazard reports and suggesting corrections to conducting site inspections and handling accident investigations. Some committees are advisory while others have specific powers to correct hazards and, in some circumstances to shut down unsafe operations.

## NON-UNION SITES

A good way to initiate employee involvement is by asking your employees to suggest ways to get everyone involved in problem identification and resolution. This can be the first participative effort.

Usual forms of Employee Involvement. Employee involvement takes a variety of forms at non-union sites. All of the methods for involving employees already discussed under the heading “What Can Employees Do To Help?” have been used at one non-union site or another.

Selecting Employees. Because non-union employees are not acting as representatives in the role of authorized bargaining agent, they really are representing only themselves. This means a completely different approach to participation.

At many non-union sites employee involvement is rotated through the whole worker population. Programs receive the benefit of a broad range of employee experience, and the entire workforce benefits from increased safety and health knowledge and awareness. At other non-union sites employee involvement relies on volunteers. At still others, employees are appointed to safety and health committees by their supervisors.

We do not recommend you hold elections at non-union sites for employees to select safety and health representatives since you could be found in violation of the National Labor Relations Act which prohibits employer involvement in the election of employee representatives.

The best method for employee participation at your worksite will depend on what you want to achieve. If improved employee awareness is a major objective, rotational programs are a good choice. If high levels of skill and knowledge are needed to achieve your safety and health objectives, volunteers or appointees who possess this knowledge and who hold their positions for several years may be preferable.

## WHAT MANAGEMENT MUST DO

Management sets the tone. Unless you are in total support of getting employees involved, and unless your employees believe you want their involvement, efforts at participation will be difficult and probably unsuccessful.

Managers sometimes claim that safety committees, for example, only want to talk about “trivial” things like cafeteria menus. This is why it is imperative that the role and duties of the safety committee be documented.

Here are some things we recommend you do to make employee involvement work:

- Believe that you will have a safe and healthful workplace, whatever it takes.
- Show your commitment through leadership.
- Communicate clearly to your employees that a safe and healthful workplace is a condition of their employment.
- Tell you employees what you expect of them.
- Give employees adequate training and resources for the job expected of them.
- Get as many employees involved as possible: brainstorming, inspecting, detecting and correcting.
- Put employees’ safety and health participation work “on the clock”.
- Take your employees’ efforts seriously. Carry out their safety and health suggestions in a timely manner or take time to explain why they cannot be carried out.
- Make sure coworkers hear about it when other employees’ ideas are successful.

## SUMMARY

Time and again, employee involvement has been shown to improve the quality of workplace safety and health programs. Your workers are uniquely equipped to provide excellent assistance in a variety of areas. What they need are opportunities for participation, clear signals from you, and management leadership, training and resources. We have seen many workplaces where employees prove their value as problem solvers, rulemakers, site inspectors, investigators, committee members, trainers, hazard analysts, and able participants in a full range of safety and health efforts. For examples of employee involvement and suggestions on how to get started, see Appendices 4-1 and 4-2.

If your employees are unionized the culture of the union and its system of accountability must be recognized if a joint effort is to succeed. If your workplace is not unionized a “happy family” approach can pay off. In both situations you have the opportunity and responsibility to set a management tone that communicates your commitment to safety and health and demands a high quality response from your employees.



**NON-UNION SITES**

A textile manufacturer with more than 50 plants (with employee populations of 18 to over 1,200), has established joint safety and health committees on all shifts at its facilities. All members are trained in hazard recognitions and conduct monthly inspections of their facilities.

A small chemical plant with 85 workers has involved employees in safety and health activities through an accident investigation team and a safety and communications committee consisting of four hourly and three management employees. The team investigates all accidents and incidents that occur in the facility. The committee conducts routine site inspections, reviews all accident and incident investigations, and advises management on a full range of safety and health matters.

Employee involvement at a farm machinery manufacturer with 675 workers includes active membership on several committees and sub-committees. Members change on a voluntary, rotational basis. These committees conduct routine plant-wide inspections and accident investigations. Employees also are involved in conducting training on a variety of safety and health topics. Maintenance employees are revising the preventive maintenance program.

A large chemical company with 2,300 employees has set up a dynamic safety and health program that encourages 100 percent employee participation. Its safety and health committee is broad and complex, with each department having its own committee structure.

Subcommittees deal with specific issues such as off-plant safety, training, contractors, communication, process hazard analysis, management and emergency response. The plant-wide committee, which includes representatives from all departmental committees, is responsible for coordination. All committee members are heavily involved in safety and health investigations. They also act as channels for other employees to express their concerns. Members receive extensive training in accident investigations, area assessments and interpersonal skills.

A shipbuilding and repair facility with 7,600 employees has established an employee/ management safety and health task force, with management and hourly employees represented equally. The task force addresses current safety and health issues and works toward resolving problems and implementing improvements in the safety and health program. It helps in safety and health inspections, accident and incident investigations, and communication of employees' concerns.

**UNIONIZED SITES**

Employee involvement at a paint manufacturing facility with 72 employees works primarily through the safety committee. Three members of the committee are hourly union employees, and three are salaried employees. Members participate in committee meetings, hold monthly plant inspections, and recommend safety and health related improvements to management.

An oil refinery with almost 400 employees involves its workers in a variety of ways. Employees act as safety and health monitors assigned to preventive maintenance contractors. They develop and revise safe work procedures. They are part of the team that develops and reviews job safety analyses. They serve as work group safety and health auditors.

A chemical company with 1,200 employees has found numerous ways to include its employees in the site's safety and health program. For example, the safety and health committee, which includes equal labor and management membership, has responsibility for a variety of activities including monthly plant inspections, accident investigations and examination of any unsafe

conditions in the plant. Employees also are involved in process and operations review teams, safety inspection teams and quality teams. Two hourly employees work full-time at monitoring the safety and health performance of on-site contractors.

An electronics manufacturer with almost 5,800 employees has established a joint committee consisting of seven management and eight hourly employees. They conduct monthly inspections of preselected areas of the facility, maintain records of these inspections and follow up to ensure that any identified hazards are properly corrected. They investigate all accidents that occur in the facility. Committee members have been trained extensively in hazard recognition and accident investigation.

**MEET WITH EMPLOYEES**

- Meet with employees in one large group (if not unwieldy) or in groups by shift or craft, depending on the nature of your worksite.
- Explain the safety and health policy of your worksite and the objectives that you hope to achieve.
- Explain that you want employees to help with the safety and health program. Ask for their suggestions.
- Try to use as many of the reasonable suggestions as possible in some visible way.

**FORM A COMMITTEE**

- Form a joint committee. It should be large enough to represent different parts of your worksite without becoming unwieldy.
- Try to have equal numbers of management and non-supervisory employees on the committee.
- Choose management members who have enough “clout” to get things done.
- Ensure that the safety and health staff serves as staff for the committee.
- If your worksite has collective bargaining agent allow that organization to decide the method for choosing non-supervisory members.
- If your worksite is not unionized you may wish to solicit the suggestions of employees as to the selection of non-supervisory members of the committee. Do not hold an election. You may inadvertently violate the National Labor Relations Act. (See page 44 for some ways to select non-unionized employees.)

**HOW TO USE INVOLVED EMPLOYEES**

- Employers most commonly involve their employees in the workplace safety and health program by having them conduct regularly scheduled, routine physical inspections. Employees work from a checklist.
  - Employees will need adequate and appropriate training.
  - They should be expected to help with decisions about hazard correction as well as hazard identification.
- You also may choose to ask the committee to study one or two difficult safety and/or health problems that management has been unable to resolve. If so, you must demand serious work and, in return, give the committee’s suggestions serious consideration.

Once the committee is well established and functioning successfully it will be in a position to suggest other ways to involve your workforce usefully in the safety and health program.